

Ridgeline offers storage innovation

Continued from pg. 1

Up front there are bells and whistles aplenty. Standard comfort and convenience items in the Ridgeline EX include air conditioning; tilt steering; power windows and door locks; power sliding rear window; cruise control; keyless entry; automatic heated wiper zone; and a six-speaker, 100-watt audio system with CD player.

Although the base Ridgeline comes well loaded you can bump up to leather and the luxu list with the EX-L trim level, along with other available options like the HomeLink Remote and satellite-linked Navigation.

In back, the 60/40 split rear seat flips up for underseat storage or to squeeze a bike across the cabin between the seats. Nice touch.

But to get to the real storage innovation, let's move out back to the truck bed.

The five-foot-long (1524 mm) composite cargo bed is dent and corrosion-resistant, provides half-ton payload capacity (705 kg) and also features six heavy-duty tie-down cleats and four integrated bed lights. And, yes the bed is wide enough for the standard truck qualifier, 4X8 sheets of plywood.

But now the real trick. Ta-daa, under the cargo floor is the industry's first In-Bed Trunk.

A trunk in a pickup truck? Yes, made possible by the less intrusive independent suspension and innovative thinking, much in the same way that adapting undercarriage architecture offered a lowered storage tub and a fold-down third row in Honda's Odyssey minivan.

This lockable 240.7-litre trunk holds up to three golf bags or tools, equipment, anything you want safely secured out of sight. It can even be used as a cooler itself, equipped with drain plugs for easy rinsing out.

Great, but how to get at it when the tailgate flops down between you and the trunk?

Well, that's why Honda also designed a dual-action tailgate that either opens down or swings to the side for easier access to the box and trunk compartment. The tailgate itself can also support up to 137 kg (300 lb), which also opens up the possibilities of taking the load of your dirt bikes' rear wheels or other extended tailgate use.

Pretty neat tricks, but do they make up for the limitations cited by traditional truck builders in the front-wheel-biased VTM-4 drive system, the not-so-off-roadish suspension system, the limited choice of body sizes and power-train selections?

Well, let's run through them. For medium-duty service the V6 engine and suspension seem plenty robust enough. There are rumours of a possible V8 added to the mix and a strong likelihood that the turbo-diesel engine coming to Acura in 2009 might also wind up in the Ridgeline, maybe even in the Odyssey minivan. The Crew cab layout covers just about everyone's needs and the Ridgeline's car-like ride and handling tends to overwhelm any quibbling load concerns.

As a matter of fact, I seem to remember that when the Ridgeline debuted, Honda had us run the trucks through a variety of off-road challenges and towing trials, pulling everything from boats to a trailered backhoe.

The Ridgeline, which comes standard with Grade Logic Control transmission, beefy brakes, heavy-duty transmission cooler, limited slip rear differential, heavy-duty power steering cooler, heavy-duty radiator with dual fans and trailer pre-wiring, performed well up to its 5000 lb towing limit in both acceleration and braking tests.

Throw in other dynamic enhancements like the standard Vehicle Stability Assist (VSA) system; ABS brakes; brake assist; advanced dual-stage, dual-threshold driver's and front passenger's SRS airbags; front side airbags and two-row side-curtain airbags with rollover sensor, and you have a pretty complete package.

The Ridgeline was also the first-ever 4-door pickup to receive a 5-star safety rating for both frontal and side impacts.

And here's the kicker. You know it's a quality product because it is built here at the Honda Alliston plant.

2008 HONDA RIDGELINE AT A GLANCE

BODY STYLE: Full-size pickup truck.

DRIVE METHOD: front-engine, Variable Torque Management four-wheel drive system (VTM-4).

ENGINE: 3.5-litre SOHC VTEC 24-valve all-aluminum V-6 (247 hp, 245 lb/ft).

FUEL ECONOMY: 14.4L/10.1L/100km (city/hwy)

PRICE: 2008 Honda Ridgeline LX, \$35,820; 2008 Honda Ridgeline EX-L, \$40,520

WEBSITE: honda.ca



Classic Honda styling blends the macho elements of oversized door pulls and rugged design with a typical car-like demeanor, ride and handling.

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